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Science groups blasted for crossing line into activism with climate-change letter to Congress

Valerie Richardson

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A letter to Congress from 31 science associations advocating for domestic and natural-security policies predicated on climate change has come under fire as a “climate power play.”

Judith Curry, professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology School of Earth and Atmospheric Science, described the June 28 letter as a “blatant misuse of scientific authority to advocate for specific socioeconomic policies.”

She also said that the professional societies, led by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, have “damaged public trust in science” by putting scientists on the same level as lobbyists.

“They claim the science is settled; in that case, they are no longer needed at the table,” said Ms. Curry in a Monday post on her blog Climate Etc. “If they had written a letter instead that emphasized the complexities and uncertainties of both the problem and the solutions, they might have made a case for their participation in the deliberations.”

“Instead, by their dogmatic statements about climate change and their policy advocacy, they have become just another group of lobbyists, having ceded the privilege traditionally afforded to dispassionate scientific reasoning to political activists in the scientific professional societies,” said Ms. Curry, a prominent climate skeptic.

In their letter, the organizations said their intent was to remind members of Congress of “the consensus scientific view of climate change,” reaffirming the message of a 2009 letter signed by 18 scientific associations.

The move comes with the White House facing opposition from House and Senate Republicans in its push for tighter emissions regulations, led by the Clean Power Plan, aimed at countering rising carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere.

“To reduce the risk of the most severe impacts of climate change, greenhouse gas emissions must be substantially reduced,” the letter said. “In addition, adaptation is necessary to address unavoidable consequences for human health and safety, food security, water availability, and national security, among others.”

Myron Ebell, director of the Center for Energy and Environment at the free-market Competitive Enterprise Institute, said most of the signers “have little or no expertise in climate science and virtually none knows anything special about making public policies.”

“In this case, the policies being advocated will destroy millions of jobs and cost trillions of dollars, but many of the professionals represented by these associations will probably do very well from more government funding,” Mr. Ebell said.

Former Democratic Rep. Rush Holt, CEO of the AAAS and executive publisher of the Science family of journals, said in a statement that climate change is “real and happening now, and the United States urgently needs to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.”

Other signers of the letter include the American Chemical Society, American Meteorological Society, American Institute of Biological Sciences, American Geophysical Union and the American Statistical Association.

“The severity of climate change impacts is increasing and is expected to increase substantially in the coming decades,” the letter said.

Policy concerns aside, the letter calls into question the signers’ impartiality in reviewing and publishing scientific research related to climate change, said Chip Knappenberger, assistant director of the free-market Cato Institute Center for the Study of Science.

“Obviously, folks should be free to deliver their opinions,” Mr. Knappenberger said. “That said, since many of these organizations publish some of the most respected scientific journals, it certainly calls into question the degree of objectivity to which new science pertaining to the issues addressed in the letter is treated with. This is a far greater concern.”

Foes of the Obama administration’s regulatory campaign say the benefits of reducing oil, coal and natural gas use must be weighed against the costs, such as higher energy prices, while taking into account scientific disagreement on the causes and extent of global warming.

“This letter is not balanced, saying absolutely nothing about the unique ability of fossil fuels to provide affordable, reliable energy on a scale of billions,” said Alex Epstein, president of the Center for Industrial Progress. “And it is not careful, failing to distinguish between the trivial fact that CO₂ causes some warming with the unfounded speculation that CO₂ causes catastrophic warming.”

In her rebuttal, Ms. Curry said the link between “extreme weather” events like wildfires and climate change “hinges on detecting unusual events for at least the past century and then actually attributing them to human-caused warming.”

“This is highly uncertain territory — even within the overconfident world of the IPCC [International Panel on Climate Change],” she said. “And the majority of the signatories to this letter have no expertise in the detection and attribution of human-caused climate change.”

She concluded that the groups “have shot themselves in the foot with this one.”